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TAGS: [PREL](#) [PGOV](#) [PHUM](#) [OFDP](#) [VM](#) [VT](#)

SUBJECT: (S) LET'S MAKE A DEAL?: VIETNAMESE PRESIDENT-POPE BENEDICT
MEETING CONFIRMED; ARCHBISHOP'S FORCED REMOVAL IMPLIED

REF: A. HANOI 911

[1](#)B. HANOI 771

[1](#)C. HANOI 699

[1](#)D. VATICAN 34

CLASSIFIED BY: Julieta Valls Noyes, DCM, EXEC, State.

REASON: 1.4 (b)

[1](#)1. (S) Summary: Following personal involvement by Cardinal Law, the visit by Vietnamese President Nguyen with Pope Benedict is finally confirmed for December 11; it's unclear as yet whether (or which?) concessions Vietnam made to secure the visit. Meanwhile, per ref a, the Vatican may indeed have made some concessions of its own to Vietnam for the sake of better relations, by pressing for the early retirement of Archbishop Kiet. End Summary.

[1](#)2. (C) Following a touch-and-go period, the visit by Vietnamese President Nguyen Minh Triet with Pope Benedict XVI in Vatican City is now finally confirmed. The meeting will occur, according to diplomatic sources, on Friday, December 11, at 11:00 a.m. Although announced in Vietnam (ref c), the visit had never been confirmed by the Holy See. Indeed, the situation was so delicate that the Vatican official in charge of relations with Vietnam refused to meet with Embassy officials in December to discuss the matter.

[1](#)3. (S) It took a visit to Vietnam last week by American Cardinal Bernard Law to finalize arrangements to allow the visit to go forward, according to a person close to the Cardinal. Further to ref a, Cardinal Law (strictly protect) told DCM in confidence on December 3 that while in Hanoi he discussed bilateral relations and the visit directly with the Vietnamese. In these discussions, the Vietnamese expressed little interest in formal diplomatic relations but considerable interest in ensuring the already-announced visit would go forward. The Cardinal did not reveal whether he obtained any concessions from the Vietnamese in order to confirm the visit, but that seems likely.

[1](#)4. (S) DCM asked the Cardinal whether the Church would indeed accept the offered resignation of Archbishop Kiet (ref a); Law indicated this was likely. Asked who could replace Kiet, the Cardinal said there are many faithful in Vietnam and a number of people could step into the Archbishop's shoes. Indeed, Vietnam is seeing an uptick in religious vocations and seminaries are turning away prospective seminarians due to lack of room. Getting authorization from the government to build additional seminaries is another matter, Law said.

[1](#)5. (S) Father Casario Sanedrin, the Southeast Asia desk officer at Caritas Internationalis (the umbrella group for Catholic humanitarian assistance organizations worldwide), also implied earlier this week in a meeting with P/E-off that Archbishop Kiet would probably go. Only 57, Kiet is much younger than the normal retirement age of 75 for Archbishops. However, the Vatican would like improved relations with the GOV, and Sanedrin implied that Kiet was perceived as an obstacle to this goal.

[1](#)6. (C) Insofar as establishing relations is concerned, Sanedrin

indicated that quiet talks remain underway. The local conference of bishops (CCBV) - which runs about 40% in favor of talks with the government, and 60% opposed - is so far largely excluded from the talks at present. Sanedrin said that the CCBV was slowly growing more open to the talks.

17. (S) Comment: Holy See priorities in Vietnam are to protect religious freedom and progressively expand it, to resolve the outstanding property disputes between the Church and the government, and when conditions permit, to establish diplomatic relations in order to protect and expand the Catholic Church in Vietnam with a formal diplomatic presence. By confronting the GOV so forcefully on property issues alone, Archbishop Kiet may have put at risk the other long-term Vatican goals. Although Vatican officials have not confirmed to the Embassy (and never will) that they requested Kiet's early retirement, it's entirely possible that they did. Insofar as what concessions, if any, the Holy See got to approve the Nguyen visit - time will tell. End comment.

DIAZ